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ABSTRACT

Communicative competence has at least three components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Strategic competence is the knowledge of how to use one's language to communicate intended meaning. Foreign language students may develop competence in each of these three areas at different rates, but all are important in developing communicative competence. Communicative classroom materials and exercises should address both the student's overall skill in successfully conveying information and his/her ability to use communication strategies when the process of conveying information encounters a problem. Most materials address only overall skills. Research has yielded some information about communication strategies that can be applied in foreign language teaching. Teachers can encourage students to use these strategies by providing both opportunities for practice and actual instruction in their use. Instruction can be direct or indirect, based on classroom exercises. The exercises providing practice build resources that allow the students to be flexible in real-world interactions. (MSE)

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# TEACHING STRATEGIC COMPETENCE IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

*ELAINE TARONE*[1]





[1]Elaine Tarone is Assistant Professor of Linguistics at the University of Minnesota. She has directed ESL programs at both the University of Washington in Seattle and the University of Minnesota. She has also served on the Research Committee of TESOL for six years.

Many foreign-language textbooks which aim to teach "communicative competence" in the language seem to equate this term with "sociolinguistic competence," that is, the knowledge of what is socially acceptable in a language. However, the concept of communicative competence is in fact much broader than this; Canale and Swain (1980) have shown that it incorporates at least three components:

1. grammatical competence, that is, the knowledge of what is grammatically correct in a language;

2. sociolinguistic competence, that is, the knowledge of what is socially acceptable in a language; and

3. strategic competence, that is, the knowledge of how to *use* one's language to communicate intended meaning.[2]

It seems clear that a student learning a foreign language may develop competence in each of these areas at different rates. While none of these components can be developed in total isolation from the others, learners in different settings do seem to develop different patterns of proficiency. For example, one may imagine a student who has acquired grammatical competence in a foreign language, and who manages to get a basic message across using that language, but who fails to do so in a sociolinguistically appropriate manner. Imagine such a student, intent upon disagreeing with a teacher's point in class:

Student: No! You're wrong!

Certainly there is nothing grammatically wrong here, and the message that the student disagrees is clear enough; the problem has to do with the appropriateness of such an utterance in a classroom lecture situation. Or, to give another example, we may imagine a student with some grammatical competence and a general awareness of sociolinguistic register, who is nonetheless unable to get intended meaning across. Some of our best classroom students complain, for example, that when they arrive in Germany (or Spain, or France) they are unable to get themselves from the train station to the hotel using the language they have learned. Similarly, we may observe that our ESL students, when they become teaching assistants for a course in astronomy, are unable to explain the subject matter to their American students. This is not necessarily because their vocabulary or grammar is inadequate, but because they have not learned how to *use* the linguistic resources they have, to convey information effectively. "Street learners," on the other hand, often excel in strategic competence. Those who have had the opportunity to develop their second-language skills language use *outside* the classroom are typically able to get their message long before they have developed native-like grammatical competence. Similarly immersion students have been observed to excel in strategic competence (Swain and Lapkin 1981).

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[2]Editor's note: The Canale and Swain framework described here has been subsequently revised to include a fourth component, discourse competence. See Swain (1983) in this volume, Canale (1983), and Savignon (1983).

The three components of communicative competence we are considering here may be defined in somewhat more detail. Grammatical competence is the knowledge of the grammatical, morphological and phonological rules of the language, and the ability to use these rules in producing correct utterances in a language. Sociolinguistic competence is knowledge of pragmatic and speech act conventious of a language, of norms of stylistic appropriateness, and of the uses of the language in establishing and maintaining social relations. Strategic competence is the ability to convey information to a listener and correctly interpret information received. It includes the use of communication strategies to solve problems that arise in the process of conveying this information.

Each of these components of communicative competence is extremely important as a goal in the foreign-language classroom--a student who has failed to develop competence in any one of these components cannot truly be said to be proficient in the foreign language. Yet it is only recently that foreign-language and ESL curricula have included more than instruction in the grammatical, morphological and phonological properties of the target language. The goal has been quite simply the development of grammatical competence. It is only recent that foreign language and ESL curricula have begun to include the second and third components of communicative competence (sociolinguistic and strategic competence) as goals of instruction in the classroom. Although we now see an increasing number of pedagogical books and articles as well as textbooks for learners advocating a "communicative approach" to the teaching of a second language, many such materials fail to clearly establish the nature of the "communication" skills being taught. Are the new materials designed to teach sociolinguistic skills? Formal and informal register? Stylistic norms? Or are they designed to give students practice in getting information across to a listener, regardless of grammatical form or sociolinguistic appropriateness? Often, the new materials seem to be trying to achieve both goals at once, or they may be unclear as to what is, in fact, the goal of a particular exercise. Many of the newer "notional-functional" syllabuses seem to aim for the goal of strategic competence in that they attempt to provide the learner with the resources needed to transmit information (notions) or messages (functions, like apologies or commands). Yet proponents of many notional-functional approaches to syllabus design do not always seem to make clear the important distinction between sociolinguistic and strategic competence.

Given that a teacher has decided that one of the goals of the language classroom should be improved strategic competence, what sorts of input and exercises should be provided for the students to enable them to achieve this goal?

There are two aspects of strategic competence that should be considered:

1. the overall skill of the foreign language learner in successfully conveying information to a listener; and

2. the ability of the learner to use communication strategies when problems are encountered in the process of conveying information.

These two aspects of strategic competence should, I believe, be considered separately.

Many of the exercises included in "communicative syllabuses, such as exercises involving group problem-solving, are designed to give the learner practice in transmitting real information using the target language. Such practice, it is believed, will result in an increase in the learners' overall skill in conveying information. And in fact, there is anecdotal evidence that such practice is helpful. Certainly students whose foreign-language background has *not* included such practice seem to be very unwilling to even *try* to communicate real information in the foreign language outside of the class, unless they have rehearsed their utterances many times to ensure grammatical correctness. Such materials as do exist focus on improving overall skill in conveying information, by (a) *teaching* students phrases and sentences useful for conveying particular notions and functions (as in many notional-functional syllabuses, where students may be taught different expressions of quantity, or of spatial relations); or by (b) providing students with *practice* in conveying information (as by setting up group exercises where students must give instructions, or share information in order to accomplish some task).

However, there are few, if any, materials available at present which teach students how to use *communication strategies* when problems are encountered in such group exercises. Students not only need instruction and practice in the overall skill of conveying information using the target language; they also need instruction and practice in the use of communication strategies to solve problems encountered in the process of conveying information. That is, if the expressions learned in, for example, a notional-functional syllabus *fail* the learners in their attempt to convey information, they have been given no instruction to help them to find alternative means of expressing that same information content. How might such instruction and practice be provided?

Students' skills in communication strategies may benefit from the sort of exercise which asks them to transmit information to a listener in a situation in which the speaker faces some problem, such as unfamiliarity with a target language vocabulary item or grammatical structure, or inability to pronounce a word or phrase clearly enough for the listener to identify it. Faerch and Kasper (1983) define communication strategies as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal." Tarone (1981a) sets out the following criteria as characteristic of a communication strategy:

1. a speaker desires to communicate a meaning X to a listener;

2. the speaker believes the linguistic or sociolinguistic structure designed to communicate meaning X is unavailable, or is not shared with the listener;

3. the speaker chooses to do one of the following:

   a. avoid, that is, not attempt to communicate meaning X; or

   b. attempt alternate means to communicate meaning X. The speaker stops trying alternatives when it seems clear to the speaker that there is shared meaning.

Some examples of communication strategies used by second-language learners in research studies (Tarone 1977; Tarone and Yule 1983) are provided below. This

list of strategies is not intended to be a final categorization of all communication strategies; it is simply provided to help clarify the notion of communication strategy.

*Avoidance*

Topic avoidance. The learner simply tries not to talk about concepts for which the target language item or structure is not known.

Message abandonment. The learner begins to talk about a concept but is unable to continue and stops in mid-utterance.

*Paraphrase*

Approximation. The learner uses a single target language vocabulary item or structure, which the learner knows is not correct, but which shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the speaker (e.g., use of superordinate term: *pipe* for *waterpipe*; use of analogy: *like an octopus*).

Word coinage. The learner makes up a new word or phrase in order to communicate a desired concept (e.g., *airball* for *balloon*).

Circumlocution. The learner describes the properties of the object or action instead of using the appropriate target language item or structure (e.g., "It's oval and shiny," "She is, uh, smoking something.... That's Persian...").

*Borrowing*

Literal translation. The learner translates word for word from the native language (e.g., "He invites him to drink" for "They toast each other.").

Language mix. The learner uses the native language term without bothering to translate (e.g., Turkish *tirtil* for *caterpillar*).

*Appeal for assistance*. The learner asks for the correct term (e.g., "What is this? What called?").

*Mime*. The learner uses non-verbal tactics in place of a lexical item or action (for example, clapping one's hands to illustrate applause), or to accompany another communication strategy (for example, "It's about this long.").

A more detailed typology of communication strategies, providing, for example, a breakdown of types of circumlocution, is available in Paribakht (1982).

Obviously, some of these communication strategies will be more successful in transmitting information than others. The initial reaction of students with little practice in dealing with communication problems is to *avoid*, and avoidance does not lead to either communication of intended meaning or to the development of the resources needed to deal with future communication problems.

What sorts of resources are needed for this purpose? We may obtain a clue by looking at the strategies used by native speakers who are confronted by similar communication problems. Native speakers typically use the strategies of circumlocution and approximation (Tarone and Yule 1983), strategies which require

certain basic or "primitive" vocabulary and sentence structures useful for describing, for example, shape, size, color, texture, function, analogy, hyponymy, and so on. We would expect learners of a foreign language who are given practice in dealing with communication problems to develop the resources needed to use circumlocution and approximation as well.

What can the teacher do to encourage students' use of such communication strategies? The foreign language classroom can provide (a) opportunities for *practice*, and (b) actual *instruction* in the use of strategies. Actual *teaching* of communication strategy use can occur in a variety of ways. Strategies can be isolated, named and discussed. Exercises such as those described below can be interrupted in order to evaluate and analyze problems that arise. Teachers can take notes on such problems, and discuss them later, after the activity. Or, students may be asked to consciously attend to strategies, "discover" and evaluate them on their own.[3]

Exercises designed to give the student *practice* in using communication strategies to solve communication problems should require that the speaker alone have information that the listener or listeners require in order to complete some task. One type of activity providing *practice* in strategy use involves asking a speaker to describe an object for which the target language vocabulary is unknown, describe it so clearly that a listener, who cannot see the object being described, can (a) pick out the correct photograph of the object from a group of photos of similar objects, or (b) draw the object. For example, a student might be asked to describe a kitchen colander, and discover a need for basic vocabulary and phrases such as the following:

made of metal (or plastic)

silver (or orange, or white)

half-spherical in shape (or bowl-shaped)

18 inches in diameter

handles located on the rim

perforated with small holes

used to drain liquid from food

This task relies on the fact that the speaker is unfamiliar with the correct target-language word for the object to be described; ignorance of the vocabulary item is the communicative problem which must be overcome.

In fact, this sort of situation occurs frequently when one uses one's native language and finds oneself unable to recall the name of an object or person. The communication strategies of circumlocution and approximation are most useful for solving this sort of communication problem. *Circumlocution*, involving a

[3]These teaching strategies were suggested by Eric Nelson.

description of the properties of the object (material, color, size, shape, texture, component parts and their location relative to the whole object) and the function of the object, is most useful. *Approximation*, involving, for example, the use of a superordinate term ("It's a type of _____"), an analogy ("It's like an octopus, but it's not an octopus.") or a related term ("It's a cigarette" for "It's a cigar"), may also be of use.

In our research (Tarone and Yule 1983) we have found that even advanced ESL students may fail to use such basic terms as "end," "top side," "strap," all useful in circumlocution. Clearly, direct instruction, either before or after the use of such an activity as that described above, will be of help in providing students with a basic set of vocabulary items useful for describing properties and functions. Certain vocabulary items and grammatical patterns will be useful again and again as these exercises are repeated: shapes (*circular, oval, square, disc-shaped, bowl-shaped, triangular*) for example, or locative phrases (*on each end, in the middle, on the rim, two inches from the top*).

A variation on this exercise involves showing a speaker how to carry out a procedure (such as assembling an object). For example, Yule et al. (1982) asked subjects to give instructions on how to assemble a meat grinder. The speaker can be shown a videotape of the procedure, or a series of pictures depicting the procedure, and then be asked to give instructions to a listener, who has the task of (a) carrying out the procedure, or (b) selecting the correct series of pictures to depict the procedure. Obviously the speaking task is much more difficult if the speaker cannot see what the listener is doing. This task involves *both* description of the parts of the object, *and* mastery of a set of instructional verbs (both basic verbs, such as *put* and *take*, and more technical instructional verbs, such as *insert, stir, screw, clamp*). Again, the teacher may find it helpful to explicitly teach the students some of these verbs.

Another variation on this activity involves practice in narration on the part of the speaker. The speaker is shown a series of pictures or a videotape depicting several individuals in a story sequence. For example, a story sequence used in Tarone and Yule (1983) involves a teacher who draws geometric figures on the blackboard and then leaves the classroom. Two students then take turns converting the teacher's geometric figures into a drawing of the teacher. The teacher returns and scolds the students, who blame each other. The listener who hears the speaker's narrative must pick out the correct series of pictures out of three or four possible picture series. It should be pointed out that in research (Tarone and Yule 1983) using all three variations of this exercise (description, instruction, narration) the narration task seemed to be easiest for the learners. Narration was easiest, *not* in the sense that learners made fewer grammatical errors, or made fewer errors in transmitting information, but rather in the sense that the speakers did not seem to be aware of many communication problems necessitating communication strategy use. Occasionally an object crucial to the narration would be hard to describe, but on the whole the linguistic resources necessary for story narration generally seemed to be much more accessible to learners than those required for description and instruction. The problems which did arise, problems of which the learners did not always appear to be aware, related to maintaining clarity of reference to the actors in the stories. This activity can provide more practice in maintaining clarity of reference if it involves stories where all the protagonists are of the same sex and same general appearance, so that speakers are forced to make some effort at keeping reference

straight by means of relative clauses or other nominal modifications (e.g., *the girl who came in first...* or *the second girl...*).

Another sort of activity which encourages the development of communication strategies has been developed by Eric Nelson at the University of Minnesota. This activity was developed in order to help students become more effective in communicating when *pronunciation* got in the way. This activity is different, then activities like the description of the colander, where the goal is to improve students' communicative effectiveness when *limited vocabulary* gets in the way. This exercise requires students to produce words and phrases which cause pronunciation problems, and encourages speakers who find they cannot get their message across because of pronunciation problems to use communication strategies to transmit the same information by other means. In order to ensure that this activity provides practice for cases where pronunciation is a problem, other possible variables (e.g., words and content of the sentences) are controlled. Thus, the content of every sentence is old information for the students, taken from earlier lessons, and all the vocabulary items have already been encountered in the class. The entire class is given a handout with 20 to 30 incomplete sentences such as the following:

1. Polution is a problem _____.
2. Many American _____.
3. _____ is important in the U.S.
4. _____ in Minneapolis is very _____.
5. Advertising is sometimes _____.

Each student also receives complete versions of two to three of the sentences, which must be said out loud so that the rest of the class can fill in the incomplete sentences on the handout:

1. Pollution is a problem *all over the world.*
2. Many American *surnames end in -son.*
3. *Punctuality* is important in the U.S.
4. *The weather* in Minneapolis is very *unpredictable.*
5. Advertising is sometimes *misleading.*

The complete sentences can be assigned deliberately so the teacher *knows* the speaker will have difficulty pronouncing the missing words and phrases. So, for example, number 4 might go to a student who the teacher knows (through previous experience) will say "za wezzah." If the speaker's pronunciation is clear enough for the class to understand what is being said, the speaker may go on to the next sentence. If, on the other hand, it is not clear enough, the speaker must use communication strategies to begin negotiations with the rest of the class in order

to get the meaning across in other words. This exercise, thus, provides practice in using communication strategies for overcoming pronunciation problems in reaching a communicative goal.

All these activities are, of course, both *speaking* tasks and *listening* tasks. They can be structured so as to place the burden primarily on the speaker (for example, by requiring that listeners maintain silence and not ask questions of clarification). But in more real life situations, a complex negotiation occurs between speaker and listener, who work together to clarify the intended message. To provide practice in negotiations, the teacher can provide instruction for the listener in these activities as well as for the speaker. Such instruction might involve the isolation, naming and discussion of behavioral interpretive strategies (cf. Tarone 1981b) such as appeals for repetition (e.g., "What?"), mime (e.g., puzzled facial expressions of various types), questioning repeats (e.g., A: The water table. B: *The Water...?* A: Water table.) and approximation or paraphrases (e.g., A: The jugworm. B: ...*Junkworm?* C: Jugworm.) A behavioral interpretive strategy often taught to counselors involves the use of extended paraphrase of the speaker's message, as in "I hear you saying that... Is that correct?". Such instruction may take place either before or after the class has participated in the activities, and may be either inductive or deductive in nature.

Exercises such as these provide practice in the use of communication strategies, and should be effective in building up resources which will enable students to be more flexible in finding ways to transmit information in real-world interactions. It is important to emphasize, in closing, that such exercises do not claim to provide the sort of practice which will necessarily improve grammatical competence or sociolinguistic competence on the part of the learner. Alternative classwork will probably be required for improvement in these other areas. However, the teacher may find the framework presented in this paper, and the suggestions for classwork included here, to be helpful as models in designing class materials which will enable students to be more effective in using the target language for the transmission of information in interactions both inside and outside of the classroom.

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